

Commentary



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Rethinking foreign policy: An emerging consensus for Canada

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Overview

Canada has an opportunity to become a leading member of the community of democracies. Yet, to achieve such impact internationally and to ensure such a reorientation is sustainable in the long-run, Canadian foreign policy needs to be better aligned with public opinion. To that end, MLI had undertaken a public opinion survey under its project, “Leading a community of democracies in the post-COVID world order,” supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. This commentary is the last of three releases based on this survey, revealing Canadian views of the country’s foreign policy direction and key global priorities.

This analysis provides a look at how Canadians view the importance of democratic allies, international institutions, defence spending, and the government’s stated foreign policy goals. In particular, Canadians strongly believe in standing up for democracies around the world, forging closer partnerships with democracies in the Indo-Pacific, revitalizing our role in NATO, and maintaining or increasing our defence spending. The public also strongly supports the government’s foreign policy goals, though strengthening our place in North America is seen as the most important. As we look to the future, the survey indicates that foreign policy will likely increase in

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importance in upcoming elections.

“International events directly impacting the safety of Canadians have heightened an awareness of foreign affairs in our national life,” says Shuvaloy Majumdar, MLI Program Director and Munk Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy. “As Canadians reflect on today’s vaccine diplomacy and prepare for rough economic headwinds, their priorities in standing with our friends, pursuing peace through strength, and engaging the world to drive Canadian growth, provide policy-makers a guide in navigating global disruptions.”

Key Takeaways

1. Canadians believe in standing with and up for democracies around the world even if it is not in our strategic interests or if it does not line up with UN policies.

A majority of Canadians (58 percent) have a positive view of Canada’s willingness to stand up for democracies in the world even if Canada has limited strategic interests. Highly-informed Canadians and Liberal voters have the highest support (67 percent and 69 percent, respectively), while not surprisingly those who say foreign policy is not important at all in their voting have the lowest (17 percent) level of support.

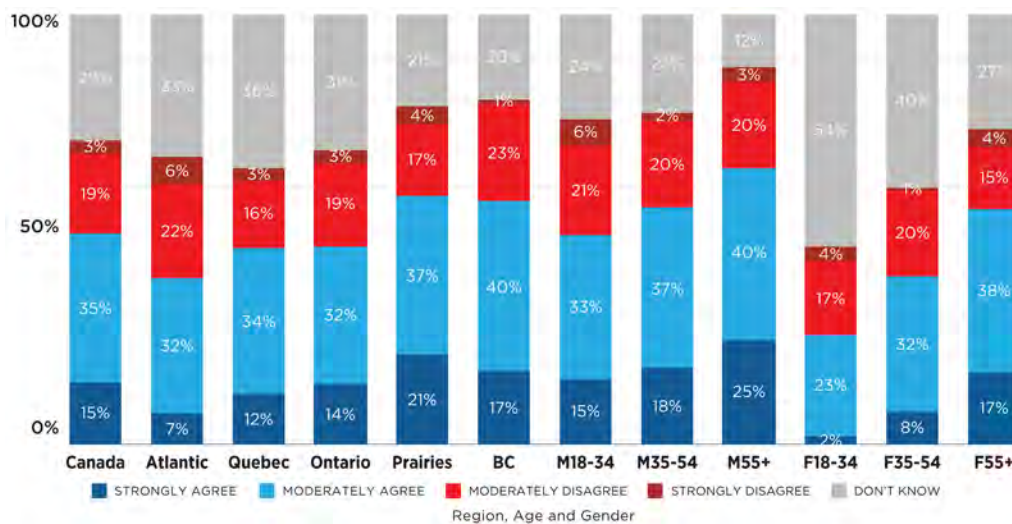
Half of Canadians (50 percent) support the idea that Canada should more often side with other democracies rather than go along with multilateral organizations such as the UN (Figure 1). Only about one-in-five Canadians (22 percent) disagree with this statement. Support for siding with democracies more often is particularly high among older men (65 percent) and Conservative voters (66 percent) and lowest among younger women (25 percent) and NDP voters (36 percent). Younger women and Canadians with a very low knowledge score also have the highest percentage of “don’t know” answers (54 percent and 49 percent, respectively).

What does this tell us? Canadians think it matters who Canada stands with in international politics and their choice is clear: democracies. What is important here is that the majority of Canadians think Canada should still do so in places that do not have much strategic importance. The qualified nature of the question (i.e., places where Canada does not have strategic interests) also suggests a principled stance rather than one that is solely based on short-term cost-benefit analysis. Foreign policy is about tradeoffs and the phrase “stand up” suggests taking sides and therefore potentially incurring costs.

Willingness of almost six in 10 Canadians (and almost two-third of highly informed Canadians) to accept costs for defending other democracies, even if they happen to be in places where we do not have many strategic inter-

ests, more than just lip service. This commitment to democratic values is reinforced by the fact that Canadians' commitment to democracy across the globe is not forced when one takes into account that only one-in-five Canadian are unconditional multilateralists that would rather go along with international organizations such as the UN rather than with fellow democracies when they are at odds. That being said, the proof is in the pudding, as the saying goes, and whether the majority of Canadians will still be willing to bear the costs of standing up for other democracies when push comes to shove remains to be seen.

Figure 1: Canada should more often side with the alliance of democracies rather than always go along with what multilateral organizations like the UN want



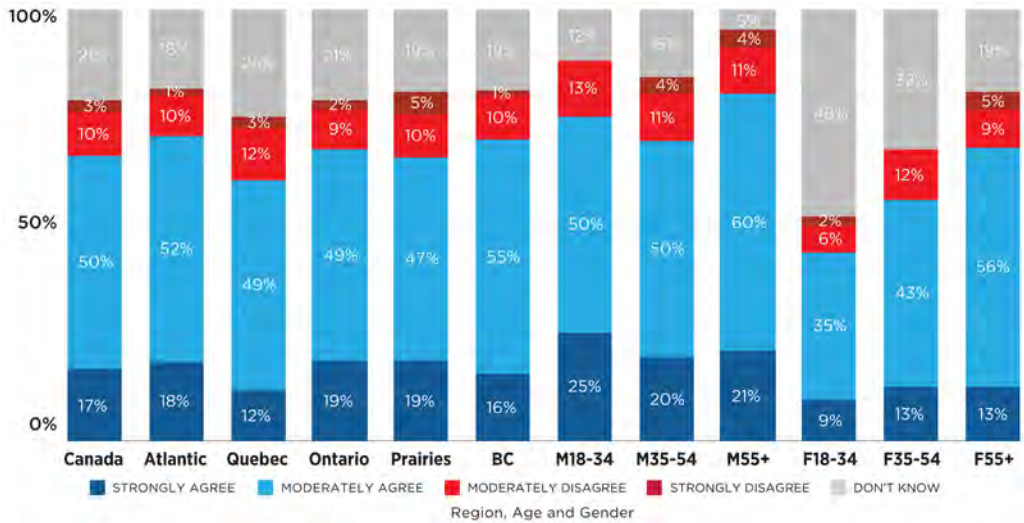
2. There is an overwhelming support among the public for building a closer relationship with the democracies in the Indo-Pacific.

Two-thirds of Canadians (67 percent) think that Canada should build closer relationships with other democracies in the Indo-Pacific region (Figure 2). Support is particularly high among older men (81 percent), foreign policy voters (80 percent), and well-informed Canadians (86 percent). It is significantly lower among young women (44 percent), Canadians with a very low knowledge score (39 percent), and those who do not vote on foreign policy at all (23 percent).

What does this tell us? These results, when taken together with the overwhelmingly negative views of China (Devlen 2020a), clearly suggests that for the majority of Canadians, working closely with other democracies should be the basis of a Canadian Indo-Pacific strategy. “The results here reinforce a point that MLI has been underscoring for some time – Canadians understand the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and want to premise our engage-

ment on relationships with like-minded partners, like Japan, India and Australia,” notes Senior Fellow and Director of MLI’s Indo-Pacific Program, Jonathan Berkshire Miller.

Figure 2: Canada should build closer relationships with other democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region

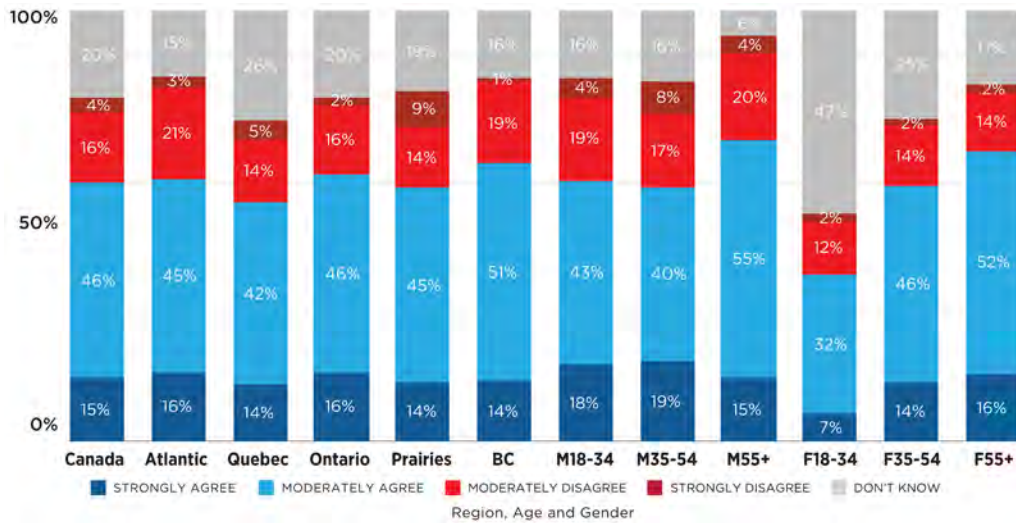


3. Majority of Canadians think we should be much more active in NATO

There is broad agreement that Canada should not withdraw from NATO (65 percent) and become much more active within it (61 percent) (Figure 3). Support for a more active Canadian role in NATO is higher among older Canadians (70 percent for older men and 68 percent for older women), Liberal voters (71 percent), and foreign policy voters (76 percent). The more informed Canadians support a more active Canada in NATO, reaching 74 percent among the highly-informed. Only 12 percent of Canadians think we should withdraw from NATO and focus on other parts of the world. It is highest among young men (23 percent) and immigrants (22 percent) and lowest among older women (7 percent) and those in the Atlantic provinces (5 percent).

What does this tell us? It is important that a solid majority of Canadians think that not only NATO is central to Canada’s security (Devlen 2020b) but also that we need to play a much more active role in it going forward. It is no wonder that the support is highest among foreign policy voters and Canadians who are well-informed about international affairs and who are more likely to recognize the linkage between our prosperity and security. Playing a greater role in the transatlantic alliance is one of the most effective ways of making Canada more secure.

Figure 3: Canada should be much more active in the NATO alliance between North America and Europe



4. More than half of Canadians think Canada should try again to get a seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) as a way of increasing Canada’s influence in the world but a partisan divide remains.

A slim majority of Canadians (56 percent) think it is a good idea to try to get at a seat at the UNSC again. Support is highest in Quebec (66 percent), women over the age of 35 (62 percent), Liberal voters (72 percent), and foreign policy voters (65 percent). However, a partisan divide remains with only 41 percent of Conservatives supporting the idea. Not surprisingly, those who do not vote based on foreign policy are the least supportive (36 percent). On the other hand, those who think it is very important for Canada to be more influential are significantly more supportive of a new bid for a seat at the UNSC (76 percent).

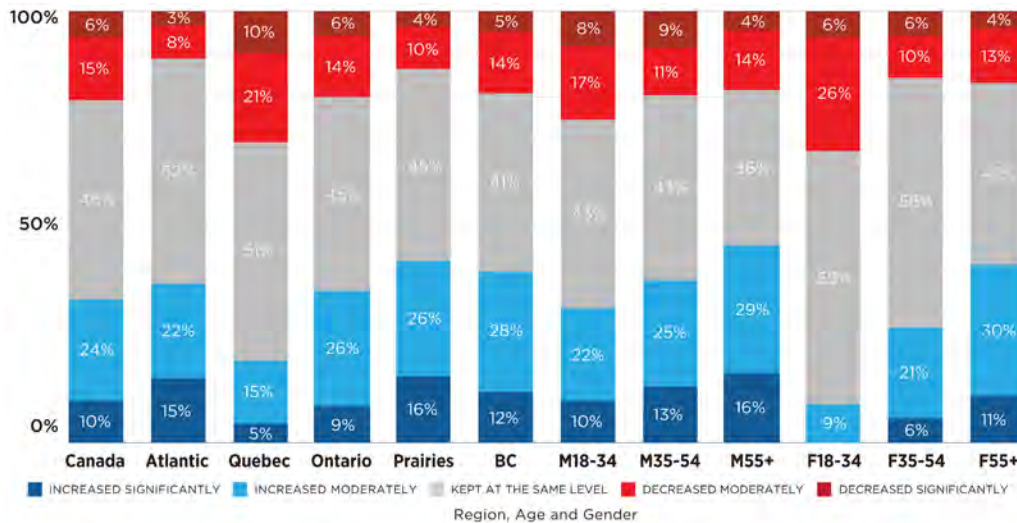
What does this tell us? Canadians want Canada to be more influential in the world. The UN, for all its defects and failings, remains the central global organization in the world today. So it is not surprising that just over half of Canadians think it is a good idea to try for a seat at the UNSC once again. There remains, however, a clear partisan divide (a 31 percent difference) that suggests politics does not necessarily stop at the water’s edge for many.

5. Only a minority of Canadians believe Canada should spend less on defence while the majority thinks it should at least remain the same or increased.

More than a third (34 percent) feel that Canada should spend more on national defence, compared to only 21 percent who would like to see it cut and

46 percent who believe it should be kept at the current level (Figure 4). Support for increasing defence spending is highest among foreign policy voters (54 percent), Conservatives (48 percent), well-informed Canadians (45 percent), and older men (45 percent) while it is lowest among younger women (9 percent), French speakers (18 percent), and Canadians who are poorly informed (18 percent).

Figure 4: In recent years, Canada spends about \$22 billion or about 6 percent of federal spending on National Defence. Do you think this should be increased or decreased?



What does this tell us? A more influential Canada would require the means to defend its strategic interests abroad and support its allies when needed. Canada has been spending round 1.3 percent of its GDP on defence in recent years. Even with the jump to 1.45 percent in 2020, due to the contraction of Canadian GDP and not a real increase in actual dollars (Berthiaume 2020), it is still well below the 2 percent guidelines suggested by NATO. It is about 6 percent of the federal budget (about \$22 billion in 2019).

Leaving aside the debate of whether the 2 percent target is a useful metric (versus what the money is actually spent on), it is clear that there is little support for decreasing defence spending among Canadians. In fact, it is notable that one-in-three Canadians support increasing defence spending and almost half support keeping the current levels even during a pandemic that devastated the economy. That suggests the majority of Canadians understand that a more active, ambitious Canada in the world cannot be realized without the resources to do the job.

6. There is a broad support for the government's stated foreign policy goals, strengthening Canada's place in North America being the most important.

Canadians broadly support the government's stated foreign policy goals, ranging from 80 percent for supporting the revitalization of rules-based international order to 91 percent for strengthening Canada's place in North America. Support for eradication of poverty is at 86 percent and pursuing diversified, modern, and inclusive trade is 89 percent.

What does this tell us? The public strongly supports the government's foreign policy priorities and the fact that the top two are about Canada's place in North America and trade highlights the fact that there is a clear understanding of what ensures Canadian security and prosperity. As MLI Munk Senior Fellow Christian Leuprecht points out, "there is remarkable consistency in foreign policy priorities between declared Liberal and Conservative voters, and a fairly broad consensus in favour of current levels of defence spending. The relative consistency of results across various groups confirm that Canadian foreign policy interests are relatively immutable." However, Dr. Leuprecht warns "they also suggest that there is no significant political payoff to be had from investing heavily in foreign policy, which means Canada will have to be more strategic, efficient and effective in allocating resources to foreign and defence policy as the overall allocation is unlikely to change."

What is not clear is how the public evaluates the government's performance in pursuing these foreign policy goals, a question that should be asked in future polls. Answers to some of the other questions suggest that the public is expecting more from the government. For instance, Canadians want Canada to be more influential in the world, be more active in NATO, and stand up for democracies and work closely with them around the globe. Taken together with the increasing importance of foreign policy for voting intentions (see below), the government's ability to deliver on these broadly-supported priorities will be an important part of how the public evaluates its performance going forward.

7. The number of foreign policy voters might be small for now but the importance of foreign policy is poised to increase in the next elections.

Foreign policy is very important for only one-in-seven Canadians (14 percent) when voting in elections. These are the foreign policy voters. It plays at least a moderately important role for more than half (53 percent) of Canadians. Young men are more likely to be foreign policy voters (21 percent) while the voters in Quebec are least likely (8 percent). Unsurprisingly the likelihood of foreign policy impacting one's vote increases with their knowledge score. About a quarter of well-informed Canadians are foreign policy voters (26 per-

cent for medium knowledge and 23 percent for high knowledge).

Almost one-third (28 percent) of voters say that foreign policy will be more important when deciding how to vote in the next election. Interestingly, these people are more likely to be those who already say that foreign policy is very important in how they vote (70 percent). However, there is an increase in the importance of foreign policy in deciding how to vote across the board, even in Quebec where it is least likely to find foreign policy voters (27 percent say foreign policy will be more important in the next election).

What does this tell us? The conventional wisdom is that foreign policy doesn't matter for the voters in the booth. "The results largely confirm what we already know: foreign policy is not a major determinant in voting behaviour, but that voters who are more informed about foreign policy, that is, people who are more educated, with higher incomes, and who are more connected to the world by virtue of being more recent immigrants to Canada, tend to make foreign a higher priority" says MLI Munk Senior Fellow and Class of 1965 Professor in Leadership at the Royal Military College Christian Leuprecht.

However, the results of this survey suggests that that might be changing. Foreign policy matters at least moderately for just over half of Canadian voters and the importance of it is set to increase across the board. Several events in the last couple years – from the detention of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig by China in an attempt to blackmail and coerce Canada to the renegotiation of NAFTA to the COVID-19 pandemic – brought forth the realization that Canadian security and prosperity is intimately tied to what is going on in the rest of the world. On that front, "the correlations between familiarity with foreign policy and priority accorded to foreign policy is striking: Canada clearly has a significant knowledge gap in foreign policy among a sizeable minority of the Canadian population that is likely skewing political attention further away from foreign policy than should be the case," remarks Leuprecht. One way to address that gap, according to Christian Leuprecht is that "Canada can heed lessons from key European allies such as Germany and France that invest very systematically in political education about foreign policy to raise the level of awareness and appreciation for the importance of foreign policy in Canadian political affairs, as only a heightened level of awareness is also going to generate the necessary level of political attention and resource allocation."

As international order remains in flux and the threat posed by authoritarian regimes like China and Russia to Canada's national interest and domestic cohesion becomes more evident, perhaps Canadians will pay even more attention to how the government navigates these choppy waters and protects Canadian interests. If that turns out to be the case, then it is reasonable to expect that their assessment of success and failure will also be reflected in the ballot box as well.

Conclusion

“The extent to which the domestic priorities Canadians cherish depend on Canada’s foreign policy choices seems lost on many Canadians,” cautions MLI Munk Senior Fellow Christian Leuprecht. Evidently, a lot more needs to be done in crystallizing the connection between domestic prosperity and foreign policy in the eyes of the citizenry. The time might be ripe for international affairs feature more prominently – from the COVID-19 pandemic to bullying and blackmailing by China – and foreign policy is poised to become a greater determinant in voting decisions.

Perhaps we could end in a cautiously optimistic tone. These results suggest the contours of a plausible consensus on Canadian foreign policy, were one to emerge. A resolve to stand shoulder to shoulder with democracies from around the world, proactively bolstering the Euro-Atlantic community, while strengthening Canada’s ties with fellow democracies in the Indo-Pacific and spending commensurate amounts on defence to assert Canada’s interests; partisan divides notwithstanding, as well as differences across gender and age on issues such as securing a seat at the UNSC or increased defence spending. Still such consensus on Canadian foreign policy approach is not too far off from its traditional priorities of securing Canada’s role in North America, expanding trade and helping those in need while reinforcing the rules-based international order that makes these goals possible.

“Canadian leaders, skillful and astute practitioners of the ancient political art of the possible, have long optimized Canadian foreign policy dividends on as minimal an investment as possible. However, the gale-force headwinds that are facing the Western democratic project make, Canada’s easy-rider approach unsustainable,” adds Leuprecht. The question of whether politicians are willing to undertake the inescapable rethinking of foreign policy and devote the resources that are necessary to succeed (and whether the public is truly ready to pay for them) remains to be seen.

About the author



Balkan Devlen is a Senior Fellow at Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Adjunct Research Professor at Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, and Superforecaster for Good Judgment, Inc. He is also the publisher of Hindsight 20/20, a newsletter on uncertainty, foresight, and geopolitics.

His primary research interests are: geopolitics from the Baltics to the Middle East, foreign and security policies of Russia, and Turkey, decision-making under uncertainty, and forecasting and strategic foresight.

He has published extensively on foreign policy, international security, and international affairs and has given several invited talks and lectures to diverse audiences including senior policy-makers in Europe, the US, and Canada. He is a regular commentator in a wide range of international media outlets on Turkey, Russia, and the Middle East. He has nearly two decades of international experience in teaching, research, and academic management in Europe, the US, and Canada. Dr. Devlen is an external expert for the European Commission's Horizon 2020 program since 2014 and has been a Vice-Chair for panel of experts. He was a "Superforecaster" in IARPA-sponsored geopolitical forecasting competition (ACE).

Previously he was Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow, Ozerdinc-Grimes Fellow at Carleton University, Black Sea Young Reformers Fellow, and Levin Institute Fellow.

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